

Transcript: Steven Solka

Today is Monday, April 2, 2012. My name is James Crabtree, and this afternoon I'll be interviewing Lieutenant Colonel Steven Solka. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. I'm at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas, and Lieutenant Colonel Solka is at his office up in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. It's always an honor for our program to be able to interview a veteran. The first question, sir, that we always like to start off with, is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the military.

Steven Solka: First off I want to say thank you very much for doing this. It's a good capture of a lot of the important historical information. My background, real quick, I was born in New York but as they said, "Got to Texas as quick as I could." I grew up in Corpus Christi and spent 17, 18 years there before graduating from high school. As soon as I graduated, I went to Texas A&M, class of 1986. Received my commission there in July of '86, and have been in the National Guard since then. I signed, at that time, it was an eight-year Guard and Reserve contract.

I assume then you were in the Corps of Cadets when you were at A&M?

Steven Solka: Yes, I was. I was in Squadron 6 in an Air Force outfit, but I signed an Army contract. I thought that would be more fun than doing things for the Air Force. And then did you go to Officer Candidate School while you were still in college or was something you did after?

Steven Solka: No. I was in the ROTC. I didn't do OCS. I went to Fort Belvoir in August of '87. That was considered my active duty time, part of my active duty time then. August until December of '87. As soon as I graduated or finished my basic course at Belvoir, moved back to the Dallas area and I've been working on the civilian side, general contractors and public agencies since, I guess, that was January, February of 1988.

Quite some time then.

Steven Solka: Yes.

What is your specialty in the Army?

Steven Solka: I'm a 21 Bravo Combat Engineer.

Okay. So Fort Belvoir is kind of like an MOS school for that?

Steven Solka: Right. At that time, Belvoir was a school of engineers. They've since moved it from Belvoir to Fort Leonard Wood. I think that was around 1988 or so, 1989. We were one of the last few classes of the basic course to go through Belvoir. Did my basic course at Belvoir, like I said. Then in '90, '91, I did my advanced course at Fort Leonard Wood. At that time they were doing a year of, well, a correspondence phase. And then the second phase was actually going to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, for a two-week course there to finish up the engineer officer advanced course. I've also completed the Combined Arms and Services Staff School and then the Command and General Staff College as well.

Are those the ones at Fort Leavenworth?

Steven Solka: Yeah. At that time, and they've changed the curriculum since then, but at that time, it was a year of correspondence and then there was kind of an in-residence phase at Leavenworth for the graduation part. For CGSC, Command and General Staff College, was four phases where I did a year worth of weekend classes, one week in a month. Then I went two weeks. I did one in California. Then the third phase was another year's worth of weekend classes. And then I did the fourth and final phase at Fort Dix, New Jersey. So CGSC actually took about four years to complete.

What was it that attracted you to the combat engineer specialty, or was that something that they told you you were going into?

Steven Solka: My father was an architect in south Texas. Jack Solka. Also an Aggie, but growing up as a kid, I'd follow him around to job sites on the weekends, and I always knew that I always felt comfortable building things and seeing how things were put together. So engineering, being a combat engineer seemed a natural choice for me rather than one of the other branches, armor, infantry, or signal, or anything like that. So I always knew I wanted to be in the branch of engineers and I haven't done any other schools in any other branch. It's always just been first nature for me.

So that was a specialty you chose too? It wasn't something they said, "Hey, you're going into this particular field."?

Steven Solka: Well, at A&M, I guess in our junior year, when you made your selection or you made your request for whatever branch you wanted, I put down Corps of Engineers my first choice, and, I don't know, chemical or quartermaster whatever, as second or third choice. Actually put down infantry as my very last choice, but again, this is 1985 or so. They were pretty much granting everyone's first wishes, no matter what. Yeah, Corps of Engineers was my first choice and glad I got it. Haven't looked back.

Now you were serving then during the Persian Gulf War. Were you called up during that time?

Steven Solka: No. I'd . . . Yeah, I was serving. I was in different units around north Texas at the time. That was 1989. No, we were never called up. We were kind of watching some of the other National Guard brigades and units being prepared and mobilized, but no, we were never called up. At that time, it was the 49th Armored Division.

As a National Guardsman, you do the training one weekend a month and two weeks in the summer, that sort of thing?

Steven Solka: Yeah. Traditionally, one weekend a month and the two-week annual training in the summer. Although for the past 10 years, since 9/11, there's been a lot. The OPTEMPO has been a lot more. Sometimes two weekends a month, depending on what's going on, or if we get new equipment being fielded, there's additional training required for that. So all told, I'd say the past 10 years, that one weekend a month and two weeks in summer has always been exceeded. Especially leading up to the time when the unit deployed last year. There is two weekends a month or there'd be a three-week period training here or one-week period where you'd go somewhere else. So it was always, like I said, the past 10 years, has been exceeded.

And what unit are you with now, sir?

Steven Solka: Currently, I'm the three for the 176th Engineer Brigade. Headquarters in Grand Prairie. And we've got an engineer battalion in Corpus Christi, the 386th, and an engineer battalion in Brownwood, the 111th Engineer Battalion. We've got different companies and detachments, probably about 15 to 18 different locations, spread throughout the state.

And you drill there at Grand Prairie?

Steven Solka: That's correct. At Grand Prairie Armed Forces Reserve Center.

A small world, sir. My Marine Reserve unit is based there.

Steven Solka: We just moved there about a year and a half ago. Right when we deployed, in July 2010, was when the unit moved from California Crossing over to Grand Prairie.

Old Naval Air Station Dallas.

Steven Solka: That's right.

I'll have to come over and say hello during one of weekends, if you're there.

Steven Solka: Okay, you bet. Oddly enough, that old Dallas Naval Air Station is where I conducted part of my CAST Q course in '98 or '97, something like that. It all comes around.

Kind of an interesting place. Kind of a ghost base with the old hangars out on the flight line.

Steven Solka: Yeah, it is.

Closed down McDonnells and that sort of thing.

Steven Solka: Exactly.

Sir, I think one of the big things we wanted to touch on in this interview is your deployment to Afghanistan. Especially with it being so recently. What can you tell us about that whole, if you want to start from the beginning, process of being mobilized all the way through? I kind of want to record your memories of your deployment.

Steven Solka: Sure. Like I said earlier, I've been in the engineer community within the State of Texas since 1988. Coming up on 25 years now, I guess. The engineer brigade, we knew that we were going to be mobilized back in late '07, early '08. So we kind of knew that that was out there and there was always the rumors out there. So basically, anyone who was getting in engineer brigade and that was qualified to deploy in '07-'08 knew that they were probably going. Just the headquarters, not one of the line battalions. But the headquarters knew that if you were getting into the unit around that time, then chances are you're going to be asked to deploy. So I transferred over to the engineer brigade in fall of '08. At that time, we fully knew that we were going to deploy. We had not received our actual orders yet. It didn't make any sense in telling families or employers at that time until we actually received the actual orders from NGB.

Once you got the orders, how long was it before you kind of got the warning order before you actually got mobilized?

Steven Solka: Yeah. The actual warning order or mobilization order received in September of '09. Up until that point, we were led to believe that we were going to Iraq. September of '09 I was attending an exercise at Fort Hood with the 1st Armored Division, in conjunction with them. Again, at the point, we thought that we were going to Iraq to support the 1st AD. At Fort Hood, the DCO and the commander of our brigade called me and said, "Nope. We're actually going to . . ." Actually, I think I saw it on some sort of mobilization document on the secret site because I had access to that communication while I was at Fort Hood. When I saw that, I said, "Oh yeah?" I did some checking and sure enough, we were going to OEF. Again, September of '09 is when we actually found out we were going to Afghanistan.

How many soldiers ended up deploying from your unit to go?

Steven Solka: We took a total of 136 people. The numbers game kind of played into at that point. We took 136 but we were only authorized 124. At that time, National Guard Bureau was allowing units to mobilize 10 percent more people than what they were actually authorized. And that was to account for additional work that needed to be done, and if anyone weren't able to mobilize, if we lost one or two people during the mobilization train up process, we still have 134 or 133 people. We had that, shall we say, a buffer. Fortunately, we did not lose a single person, so when we actually landed in Afghanistan, we had 136 people.

How long was your training process, your mobilization process, and where did you do most of that?

Steven Solka: Our orders were for 400 days. The unit's mobilization orders are dated July 10th of 2010. July 10th, we mobilized at the armory, again at California Crossing. Spent three days there and then we flew to Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, on the 13th of July of 2010. We spent, I want to say, like 42 or 43 days, at Fort McCoy, and we left for Afghanistan around, I want to say, August 28th of 2010. Landed at whatever base we were . . . We were actually at several different locations. Landed at our main base around August 29th or 30th, or two days later, give or take.

Was there a reason why they sent you to training in Wisconsin?

Steven Solka: That was the place that all the engineer forces were mobilizing from. Whether you're engineer company, a battalion, or a brigade headquarters, we were mobilized from Fort McCoy. They had the infrastructure, the training facilities to send out small and large formations to a theater. The unit we replaced, 372nd Engineer Brigade at USAR Unit, mobilized out of there 10 months before that. Ten or 11 months before us. The unit that we thought we going to replace in Iraq, the 16th Engineer Brigade, mobilized out of there at the same time. The ground had been set for us to go from there. Since then, they've now . . . 1st Army has basically shut down operations at Fort McCoy, and they're mobilizing units out of . . . I want to say Fort Lewis in Washington.

You mentioned that you were part of the headquarters element that deployed. Did you have other companies, I guess, that went through the training in Wisconsin as well?

Steven Solka: Yeah, we did. Again, our 136 people went through Fort McCoy. And actually, on a side note, we were the first engineer brigade headquarters to go through McCoy. There'd been about three or four before us that did not lose a single person, neither due to training or to medical issues. All 136 people landed at McCoy and left from McCoy, which is the first time

that had ever been done. But while we were there, there was another National Guard unit that was under our command and control when we got to Afghanistan. The 112th Engineer Battalion out of Ohio was there at the exact same time as us along with one of their subordinate companies as well, like a route clearance company out of South Carolina, 1221st Clearance Company.

What were the typical missions that your unit would do while you were in Afghanistan?

Steven Solka: Well, our brigade headquarters had a two-function mission. One was to command and control route clearance companies as they went around the area, our area of operations, clearing roads to ensure mobility around not only for U.S. forces but for Afghans as well. So, our mission regarding the route clearance was to make sure that we knew exactly where they were, who all was out there, and we were supporting our higher headquarters unit which, at that time, it was the RC East combined joint task force which is the 101st Airborne Division. The second part of our mission was to build facilities on U.S. bases or coalition bases, and also to build any new bases that needed to be built or deconstruct ones that needed to be, that were required to be closed down. We did some work out in the local area, in the local community, but that was kind of a rarity for us right when we got there but during our time in country, there was a big push to basically put an Afghan's face on work that we were doing. So, whenever we could, we'd partner with local Afghan army units.

Tell us, sir, a little bit about the route clearance aspect. I know that makes a lot of news. People are familiar with the IEDs and roadside bombs and that sort of thing. Tell us a little bit about how your unit would go about engaging in that type of mission.

Steven Solka: Well, our overall command and control, we had . . . There was three or four route clearance battalions under our command and control. Like I said, the 112th out of Ohio, National Guard unit. Their primary mission was route clearance. We had the 2nd Engineer Battalion, an active duty unit out of White Sands Missile Range was under our control, and when we first got there, the 27th Engineer Battalion out of Fort Bragg was also under our command and control. Under each one of those battalions, they had anywhere from three to five route clearance companies that, again, their primary missions were route clearance, going out and assembling convoys and going from point A to point B up and down routes to clear the routes for coalition and Afghan convoys, and also to provide freedom of movement for the Afghans in that local area, farmers or whoever it was that was attempting to utilize those roads.

Did your unit have the MRAP vehicles for that?

Steven Solka: Yeah. The headquarters, we had some up-armored, I mean, not up-armored but some MRAPs, MATVs assigned to our headquarters. The route clearance companies and the battalions had MRAPs and MATVs and the Buffaloes which were detection or interrogation vehicles. And then also Huskys which were the detection vehicles that would lead at the front of the convoy with different types of technology, whether it be GPR or rollers to detect any IEDs that were buried in the road.

Was EOD under you guys at all or was that a separate entity?

Steven Solka: EOD was not under our control but sometimes they had EOD vehicles or units that were embedded with the route clearance convoys. Again, it depended on where the unit was going and what the EOD units were, if they were available. There were some bases where there

were no EOD units that were available, that they were more of the asset of the brigade combat team that had geographic responsibilities. So there were some brigade combat teams that would, you know, slice off or distribute EOD units through the route clearance companies, and there were some that just didn't do that. They kept them for their own use. So, it's not a logical way of doing it but there were some rhyme and reason for not having EOD or having EOD units with them. But whenever there was a route clearance patrol that went out, whenever there was an EOD unit assigned to them, that was an enabler or just an added benefit of that route clearance company so . . .

What area of Afghanistan were you all working out of?

Steven Solka: Our engineer brigade had geographic responsibility for RC East, RC North, and the RC Capital region. RC East had the highest priority so we would always, we would devote a lot of attention to activities that were going in RC East and resources. RC North had the next higher level of priority, and RC Capital didn't have that much priority. Those levels of priority were assigned to us by the International ISAF, International Security Assistance Force Joint Command. So, our engineer brigade had responsibilities for East, North and Capital. The other engineer unit in Afghanistan had responsibility for RC South, Southwest and West. And ironically, the other engineer unit was one of the naval construction regiments out of the Navy. So, we were one of two theater engineer assets in country.

So I imagine that kept you and your troops pretty busy?

Steven Solka: Yeah, we did. There was always somebody that we needed to coordinate or respond to for whatever route clearance or construction mission. We had, the majority of our . . . The headquarters unit was located at FOB Sharana. In RC East, we had a LNO officer in Kabul that dealt with everything at the IJC at the international level, and he also, Steve also dealt with some of the U.S. forces out of Afghanistan, personnel as well as far as resources and logistics. We had . . . Our logistics element was based at Bagram Air Base with about 20 to 25 people there, our supply guys. And then we also had about a five-person LNO cell that responded to any operations that were going on in the RC North. RC North was primarily, it was German run. The commander of RC North was a German, so the staff in RC North dealt a lot with the German staff as well.

During this time, were you the S3?

Steven Solka: Yes, I was the three the entire time.

Tell us, sir, for those listening that aren't familiar with the term what exactly that means, to be the S3 for your unit.

Steven Solka: Well, three is responsible for operations and planning within a unit. The S4 or the four is logistics, two or S2 is intelligence, and one or S1 is responsible for administrative functions. All of those primary staff sections report to the chief of staff or the XO of the brigade. We also, as a brigade staff since we were . . . Our commander was a one-star general, Brigadier General Lester Simpson, there was also other special staff. We had a five section which looked out for future operations. We had a six, a G6 for communications, a G7 which was the technical design and engineering cell. We had a G8 which was the finance and budgeting. We had a G9,

civil military operations. Plus we had a brigade chaplain, the medic section, I mean, yeah, the medics as well.

As the S3, were you often in like a combat operations center during the day monitoring what was going on?

Steven Solka: Yeah, my area of responsibility covered the tactical operations center which monitored the current operations. The five, the G5 for future operations, also fell under my responsibility. They were looking at events and operations anywhere from 30 to 45 to 120 days out. And then also had the plan section, the G35, which kind of bridged a gap between current operations and future operations. So they were looking at stuff from, you know, one or two days out going out to 25, 30, 40 days out. They actually had a section of three or four guys led by a major, Major Pat Nolan. They wrote a lot of operations orders, frag orders, or fragmentary orders, that covered a lot of the operations, in fact, all the operations that went on within that timeframe.

Would you have a chance to get out much on patrols, or did you have a desire to even get out much?

Steven Solka: Well, I did not get out as much as I expected to, or I wanted to. I did get out on a few missions, noneventful. But there's a lot of briefings and meetings that I just couldn't miss that I had to go out on, I mean, where I had to attend where I couldn't get out on a mission. I did some traveling around via flying around going from . . . I went to Kabul a few times for briefings or meetings. I went up to RC North, flew up there with the general on a visit just to get a lay of the land and talk to some of the staff officers up there. But in answering your question, I did not get out as much as what I had wanted to and as much as I kind of expected to when I hit the ground in country.

What are some of your memories or your impressions of what you did see of Afghanistan? I know it's in the media a lot but what was your personal take on everything?

Steven Solka: My personal take is, I think, actually I know we're doing good there for the Afghans. You know, they've got . . . They're definitely not a western society but their quality of life could be improved, and, you know, just the fact that we've been there for 10 years and we're building things, we're doing things for them, I believe that we've got a lot of good people that are teaching them some good skills, whether it's farming or ranching or construction or business, anything like that, we're . . . I think they're going to be a better society after we've left once we leave.

Did you have a chance to interact, the times you did go out, ever have a chance to interact much with the local Afghans?

Steven Solka: Not a whole lot. There were some . . . There was an Afghan army unit that was kind of co-located on our base, actually adjacent to our base. I met with them a few times. One of our engineer subordinate companies had a habitual working relationship with them, so they were the primary interaction with the Afghans. The Afghans were, unless you were, you know, a company commander or lieutenant, they really didn't respond well to people of higher rank unless you just dealt with them all the time. And that wasn't what I did so it seemed like

whenever they had a visitor of high rank come around, they wouldn't . . . They weren't really responsive or receptive to that.

Interesting.

Steven Solka: Yeah, it's a different culture but it works for them.

And how long were you there for, in Afghanistan?

Steven Solka: Landed within August of 2010 and left in June of '11, so about 10 and a half months on the ground.

Yeah, quite a while. Did you have a chance for any R&R halfway through?

Steven Solka: Yeah, I did. I came back to Dallas in March of 2011 for two-week R&R.

How was that? I know for some folks they say it's really difficult to return home for a period of time knowing that they're going back.

Steven Solka: You know, coming back, on the way back it's wasn't bad but leaving . . . Yeah, that was tough. My kids . . . I've got two boys, Matthew and Drew, at that time they were 17 and 14. You know, they did not want to go to the airport to see me off. They just . . . We hugged and kissed and shook hands in the morning before they went to school, and then my wife took me to the airport later that morning but they did not want to go to the airport to see me off.

But it's one of those situations where if you don't take that two weeks, it's not like you come home two weeks earlier, right?

Steven Solka: That's correct.

Yeah. What are some of your best memories of your time in Afghanistan? Were there any particular moments that stand out?

Steven Solka: Not any one particular moment. I just, you know, I just enjoyed the camaraderie of the people around me, and some of the units that I dealt with. You know, whether they were an active duty unit or National Guard or Reserve unit. We also had Navy Seabees and Air Force engineer company engineers under our command and control as well. So I dealt with them quite a bit. So just knowing how other components worked and just the camaraderie was good. And, again, seeing a different way of life was extremely interesting.

While you were there, I imagine you had pretty good ability to phone and get email and that sort of thing, and then also mail, packages?

Steven Solka: Yeah, technology, you know, just like here in the States, I had three computer systems in my office, the SIPR which is the U.S. only secret system, and then the Centrex which is the coalition, for all coalition forces to see, and then just a regular what we call the NIPR or the green side which is just normal traffic. You know, I could get on CNN or send emails to my wife, so communication, not a problem. There were some times when they would go down but, hey, you're in a war zone, that's expected.

Exactly. How about the soldiers that served under you? How do you think most of them dealt with the deployment and how they felt about the deployment?

Steven Solka: I think overall everyone in our unit, headquarters unit, dealt well with it. There were a few cases of people not, you know, not dealing with it very well. A few people went home. A majority of them, in fact, I think all of them were for medical reasons. A guy broke his collarbone or those sorts of medical issues. But overall I think the deployment was good for a majority of the people. Some people, like me, it was their first deployment. Others had been to Iraq at least once, two times. A few other people had been to Afghanistan a number of times. There was one of our sergeant majors had been to Afghanistan, I think this was his third trip to Afghanistan, and he'd been, I think, once in Iraq. So, he'd spent a good time away from home on deployments the past 10 years.

And where were you staying most of the time? Were you on one of the big bases there?

Steven Solka: Yeah, like I said, the main body of our headquarters element was at FOB Sharana in RC East. We were, I think, 17 miles from the Pakistan border. Sharana is . . . Was, it still is a large logistical hub. Has a C-130 landing strip and at the time we were building a C-17 landing strip which has since been canceled. But all told, I think at one time there was 9,000 people on Sharana, that was military and civilian.

That is a good-sized footprint.

Steven Solka: It was large. I think the perimeter of the base is 18 miles around.

Wow.

Steven Solka: And it had just been expanded right before we got there, so it was a small city, small town.

What were the living conditions like? Did you live in the, I know sometimes they describe them as cans, the little portable . . .

Steven Solka: No, we didn't . . . There were not a whole lot of the cans, the containerized units, on Sharana but most of the living quarters, I'd say about half the living quarters, were wooden B-huts, and the others were tents with floors. But we lived in . . . Everyone had wooden living facilities with communal latrines. We had our own compound. We were on kind of the central part or the old part of Sharana. It had been there for a number of years so it was pretty well established. You know, again, we were inside our compound, our living quarters are right there. The headquarters building was about 25 feet away from where I slept so . . .

Easy commute?

Steven Solka: Yeah, easy commute. Didn't have to, you know, wait in line at the red lights or anything like that.

How about the weather? Did you get much snow and cold weather in the wintertime?

Steven Solka: You know, we were fortunate with the weather. Sharana is about 8,000 feet above sea level kind of on a plateau, kind of up in the mountains. The altitude was a little bit hard to get

used to at first but after a while you get used to it. But as far as . . . Like I said, we got there in August, didn't stay hot that long, and then it kinda got cool. We only had a couple of blinding snowstorms, and it stayed cool until March or so. But the weather wasn't too bad and it didn't get hot. I think it started getting hot when we left in June of '11, but rained maybe three or four times so it wasn't . . . I mean, it was a desert environment so it wasn't . . . The weather wasn't bad at all.

You described the elevation being over 8,000 feet. Tell us what the biggest challenge was with that? Was it just being able to breathe normally at times?

Steven Solka: That's exactly it. Between the elevation and just the wind and the dust and haze and some of the smog that just drifted over the base, those are the biggest challenges. And, oh, by the way, right outside the engineer compound there was a sewage treatment lagoon so we would always have that smell drifting over us which is . . . You know, after a couple weeks of that, you just get used to it and say, "Kind of ripe today." And you just move on and do what you gotta do.

Did you ever get any USO shows while you were out there?

Steven Solka: There were a couple USO shows that came to our base. I think . . . I didn't go to any of 'em. I don't think I ever got the chance. There's a couple that came that I wasn't on the base or whatever reason, I couldn't make it. So, there were some USO shows that . . . I think Robin Williams came once, and the Redskins cheerleaders came. I didn't get a chance to see any of that.

Tell us then what it was like when you came home. I'm sure that was a nice reunion with the family.

Steven Solka: Yeah, it was. We landed at Fort Hood and just due to the normal demobilization process, families didn't show up, weren't allowed to show up at Fort Hood. So once you land at Fort Hood in the middle of the afternoon, we pretty much went into lockdown. We had about four or five days of medical processing and turning in gear and mandatory briefings that we had to go through. But we had a redeployment ceremony at the Gatesville High School which turned out real well. Kinda had to plan that at the very end, the last minute. Fort Hood would not allow us to do anything on base which seemed kind of odd but we were able to work something out with the Gatesville School District so we used the Gatesville High School auditorium, and families and friends showed up so . . . My wife, Andrea, my kids, my parents, my in-laws, my brothers, all showed up. And everyone had anywhere from two to 10 people show up so it was a pretty big crowd.

Why do you think it was that Fort Hood wouldn't allow that on base?

Steven Solka: Well, I've got my guesses but probably just more of a logistical problem trying to get all that coordinated, allowing all those family and friends on to base. But, for whatever reason, okay, so active duty said you can't do this, but we figured out a way to work around them.

That's good. I wasn't sure if it was some sort of issue with National Guard versus active duty or that sort of thing or if you see much of that in the Army. I wasn't sure if that was an issue.

Steven Solka: Well, I don't think that was the issue but, you know, you bring up an interesting point about National Guard and Reserve and active component. You know, again, when I first got in the Guard and up 'til 2001, I guess, I always noticed or was aware of a big divide between the active component and National Guard and Reserve, but, you know, I think as everyone is fully aware of now, there's been a lot of deployments of National Guard and Reserve troops overseas. So there is a . . . There really is a one-team, one-fight mentality now.

It seems like, yeah, much more unified effort, everybody being on the same sheet.

Steven Solka: Oh yeah, I mean, you know, you go to any post or go overseas, and it says U.S. Army on your chest. It doesn't say National Guard, doesn't say Reserve, doesn't say that on 'em.

Yes sir. I saw here on the email that you sent us, the screening performed, that you also were awarded a Bronze Star. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that, and was that related to this deployment.

Steven Solka: Yeah, it was a result of this deployment, Bronze Star for Meritorious Service. You know, put in, nominated by, I guess, the brigade chief of staff and approved by the commander of the brigade.

That's great. When were you awarded the Bronze Star?

Steven Solka: That was, I think it was in June of 2011, right before we redeployed.

That's great. Did you expect that at all?

Steven Solka: No, I didn't. I just went into the deployment just, you know, expecting to do the best job I could, and I think I, in fact, I believe I did the best job I could have, and hope I didn't let anyone down, either my commander or any of the guys above me or, you know, anybody that I worked with or for. I did the right thing, so . . .

That's great. I believe in Texas you can have a Bronze Star license plate. I don't know if that is for meritorious or valor service. Do you have one of those?

Steven Solka: No, I don't. I just have the Texas Guard plates with the Minuteman on there. I've had that for a number of years. That's good for me. Hopefully it fends off any speeding tickets if I'm caught and they may elect to saddle me with. No, I'm good with my Texas Guard plates.

Well, sir, I don't know if I mentioned this to you before in the email or not, but here at the Land Office we have archives that go back to the 1700s. Really, the point of this program is two-fold. One is to thank veterans for their service but it's also to record these stories for posterity. We have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo, and we have the registro that Stephen F. Austin kept of all the original settlers that came to Texas. So our goal is to add this interview, along with scores of others that we've done, to that archive so that potentially hundreds of years from now people can listen to this interview and maybe get something out of it. With that in mind, is there anything you'd want to say to somebody listening to this interview years from now.

Steven Solka: Yeah, one thing I would like to add. Like I said earlier, this is my first deployment and before I deployed I had always heard that the toughest job for anyone living

through a deployment is the family, and I really didn't place, you know, a whole lot of thinking on that. But now that I've done it and come back, there really is a lot of truth to that, you know. My wife, Andrea, and my parents, my in-laws, my brothers, they really, I think, they had a lot tougher time than I did. I kinda knew what I was doing every day. Wake up, do what I had to do, and go out on mission or fly around, whatever I had to do and come back. So I knew exactly what I was doing all the time and what the risk and danger were. They had no idea, and they would . . . The support from the family back home to include my employer. You know, I received a good number of boxes and packages, and I can get emails but they . . . The people back at home, the support from the public is absolutely job number one. Without that support, there's no way that the U.S. military could be doing what we're doing. Here it is 10 years later and we're just in Afghanistan but in Iraq and Afghanistan and everywhere else that the military goes and all that, support from the family and friends and just the Joe Q. Public is just, hats off to them. There's no way that I or anyone else could do it without that support.

Yes sir. I agree 100 percent. I think you're right. I think the families are the ones that really put up with a lot, especially when they're seeing the evening news and all the bad stuff on the news all the time, and the politicians talking and then . . . You know, they worry about a phone call or somebody knocking at their door and bringing bad news and so . . .

Steven Solka: Right. Exactly right.

You're right. When you're over there, you're busy and occupied and you don't worry about that sort of thing.

Steven Solka: Right.

Well, sir, again I really want to thank you for letting us interview you today and it's just an honor for us. Like I mentioned before we started the interview, in a couple weeks we'll get copies of this interview sent to you on CDs along with a letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson. And then a little after that, it's going to take a little longer, but we'll get a copy of the transcript made and we'll send that to you to look over and eventually hopefully we can get all this posted on the website as well.

Steven Solka: Well, thank you very much, you know. I stumbled across the website and been listening and reading some of the other transcripts from other veterans from World War II and Korea, Vietnam and Iraq, and it's extremely interesting. A lot of good information out there, and capturing all that is extremely admirable job so hats off to you for doing this.

Thank you, and if you know any other veterans out there who are currently serving or retired that are interested in doing an interview, have them give me a call or send me an email. We'd be honored to do so.

Steven Solka: I will. I'll pass the info on.

Yes sir. All right. Well, thank you very much, sir, and we'll talk to you again soon.

Steven Solka: Okay, take care, James.

Yes sir. Bye bye.